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A teacher of English composition analyzes a few examples of written compositions given him by a class of adult job trainees, the majority of whom are of ghetto high school background. By concentrating on the positive aspects of their efforts and deemphasizing rigid grammatical mechanics which tend to inhibit their expression, he discovers that his students have a desire to write, as well as an abundance of natural creativity. (CW)

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Freedom to Write: A Composition Course for Ghetto Adults

DAVID P. DEMAREST, JR.

TE 500 249

If our society makes good on its promises to train increasingly large numbers of ghetto adults for profitable employment, college composition teachers will find themselves more and more often called on to teach in training programs. And they will be asking again in a new context the old, vexing questions—what does one teach in a composition course, or in "language skills," or in "communication" (what does one ever teach?), how does one teach it?

My own experience in '67-'68 in two ten-week programs designed to train paraprofessional mental health workers has suggested to me some tentative answers. My responsibility was to meet a class (of ten trainees in one session, of fifteen in the other) for two hours a week to teach something called "language skills." While a few of the students fell into a 35 to 50 age bracket, most were in their twenties, and the average age was 20 to 25. The average age was, therefore, not startlingly different from what I'm used to in upper-class and graduate courses. But the backgrounds of the students were strikingly different from those of students at our affluent universities. At least several of the men had reform school and/or prison records, and some of the women (possibly a majority) had already been separated from a first husband and were trying to support children themselves. While most of the trainees were technically high school graduates, most of them had gone to ghetto high schools, and a number were dropouts who had passed a high school equivalency test. All of the students but one were Negro. In short, they did not look much like, nor could they be expected to write much like, the average class of university freshmen.

An obvious possibility in the course was to emphasize mechanics. Everyone in the class, in some degree or another, demonstrated in his first paper a version of nonstandard English. It was clear that I could spend as much time as I wanted working on subject-verb agreement, comma splices and sentence fragments, apostrophes, or what have you. And it was unrealistic to suppose one could ignore this problem. After all, the bureaucrats who would be immediate superiors of many of the trainees in various agencies might be the sort who would worry about grammatical protocol. Every week, therefore, I spent some time reviewing obviously nonstandard usages that had showed up in papers.

But the fact that these trainees had problems with mechanics struck me as the least interesting thing about them, and certainly a problem area that would be dealt with least interestingly by slogging through mistakes and giving exercises and quizzes. Two other factors showed up that suggested directions for a composition course. One was the fact that many in the group *wanted to write.* I put this in italics because it may seem strange to the ears of freshman composition teachers. Largely verbalized to me in out-of-class comments, the desire to write seemed to involve two attitudes. First, there was the opinion of several that "I want to be a writer," "I'd like to write a novel," or "my story," or "my memoirs"; the basic attitude here seemed to be "I have a lot to tell." Then there was a willingness, if not always an eagerness, to work on writing assignments because the group gener-

ally seemed to regard writing as the basic thing they needed to know. Writing seemed to symbolize what education meant. Looking at this side of the trainees' attitudes, a college composition teacher might be heartened as he recalled lukewarm receptions in the college classroom. Obviously, one part of the teaching job was to figure a way to capitalize on this readiness to write.

Paradoxically perhaps, co-existent with these positive attitudes was a very narrow conception of what the classroom study of writing would mean. Most of the trainees—maybe not unlike college freshmen—tended to regard mechanical mistakes as the cardinal writing sins. Moreover, the fact that they made mechanical mistakes in their writing seemed a constant reminder that they could not write, no matter how much they wanted to; mechanical mistakes disqualified them. Indeed, it may not be overstating it to suggest that their grammatical errors symbolized for them their lack of education.

The essence of the problem that revealed itself, I felt, was accentuating the positive—finding subjects and methods which would allow the trainees to see the important ways in which their writing was good or could be made good. I wanted them to see that there were more valuable standards—and ones more accessible to them—than impeccable mechanics. This approach might have ancillary advantages of helping their confidence in job situations and of enabling them to perform better a function that should be expected of paraprofessionals —telling it like it is.

I had tried from the start to make the weekly topics tangible, close to the trainees' own backgrounds and lives, relevant to problems that they might encounter in mental health work—a description of a street, a child's view of his family or his school, an analysis of the problems faced by middle class social workers. I began in both groups with the description of a street, and in certain respects that topic turned out both times to be my most successful assignment—primarily, I think, because it allowed people leeway in developing it (sometimes, with more specific topics the group would accuse me of "prying" or being "nebby"). Here are two of the papers I received on "a street"—both written in class in less than an hour's time.

> Frankstown Avenue—better known as the Avenue—is an Ghetto artery of one of the black pockets of Pittsburgh. At the beginning of dawn to many hours after the setting of the sun, the street is congested with life. There's the junkie, the drop-out, the hustler, the man, and the many more that constitutes the ghetto. It is the whitey that opens it in the morning and also the whitey that closes it at night. The joints are opened a few hours before the stores; they are also the last to close. The street is a place to mingle, to shop, or to forget.

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> The name of the street is Monongahela, the name of the borough Swissvale. The street runs approximately twenty blocks from Braddock Ave. to the Rankin Bridge. At the beginning of the street where all of the homes are occupied by white families, the street is clean, well-kept, lawns, windows, flowers etc. As you turn the corner it is the beginning of a commercial area; store cleaners, barbershop, hardware, etc. This runs for about seven to ten blocks and it converts back to residential. Now the homes are a little less attractive they are not as well kept, the further you get to the end of the street the more dirty the street becomes the more ragged the lawns and scrubbery. When you get to the end of the street just before you cross the bridge. This is my end the end in which I was reared. I think that there was never any possibility of getting to the other end. The other end of the street doesn't interest me anymore because I want to

> go even farther than the end of the street itself. The street affords me challenge. When I was young we weren't good even for the top of the street, now I'm too good for the *Street*.

Both of these papers turned up certain mechanical problems that needed to be pointed out to the authors. More important to show the class, however, were the clear virtues each paper contains. Both demonstrate an excellent use of precise detail, achieving a tangible, you-are-there quality. The second paper emphasizes this effect with a specific and consistent viewer's point of vision that also organizes and emphasizes the idea of the paragraph. Both papers thus allowed me to dramatize (I used the overhead projector throughout the program) writing virtues that I felt were important for and communicable to the whole group—concretion, specificity, coherence, central point.

The first paper has a special virtue or interest. In its compression and in the rhythmic pattern of its sentences, it is almost poetic. When I pointed this out to the group, there was a surprising revelation about the trainees' writing interests: they felt it a high compliment that I told the author he was writing something close to poetry. Far from the jaundiced view of poetry sometimes taken by a college class, writing poetry was an interesting idea to them—expressive of their wish to write, to tell their own experience and ideas. Again this interest was confirmed by personal, out-of-class comments about poetry, and by one young woman's volunteering to read aloud poetry she had been writing on her own.

This revelation about poetry-writing occurred early in my experience with the first training cycle and encouraged me to establish a principle that I applied from that time on throughout the whole program. More often than not, I allowed the trainees to write their weekly papers in the form that felt most comfortable to them—poetry, prose narrative or description, conventional essay paragraphs. Here are two responses to the same assignment—a ghetto child's view of his environment—written by different authors from those of the first papers cited.

> Have you watched the Black children playing in their homes? They are always a little angry—and a little sad. The presents of books in any other gage than Mike Shane, has never been known, and the toys have been crushed into odd shaped pieces of plastic.
>
> They play with pencils, and write on the walls, but no body cares because it isn't a very good wall anyway. The plaster is broken and the paint is old and peeling. The pencils are soon abandoned, because the wall is much too ruff to write on.
>
> They play with garbage, and find all sorts of new things; there are pieces of radios, and there are new pieces of broken toys; and there are knives and all kinds of wonderful things. The garbage is a fine source of fun, and there is so much of it around the homes of the Black people.
>
> The roaches are still one more way to pass a pleasant evening at home. The children all get rolls of newspaper or comic books, and they turn out the lights. The little ones, one and all, come out of the stove, and the ice box, and behind the sink. Little do they know that before they can eat the filth that has been left, an ambush will be inacted. The children turn on the lights suddenly and rush into the kitchen, smashing and crushing the little ones: The bodies are everywhere, but the eggs are everywhere too, and before the night is out ten thousand more of the little ones will be born, so the game can go on, tomorrow night and tomorrow night.
>
> The Black children have all the fun.

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> Child Ghetto Environment
> The hard callous child Lives in this block

And he plays in the Empty lot.
Child can have fun anywhere,
So why should the City care?

Child breaks windows with sticks and stones,
Mother busy on the phone.
Neighbors, cry, take a look and see,
What your child has done to me.
Tell his father, he have no time,
he's down on the avenue drinking wine.

Child house is shabby, cold, and falling down
Even the rats moved across town.
So child cat is Lonely as can be,
and he starving, so that makes three.

Child goes to school and try to learn,
teacher shouts, "wake up Billy its your turn."
Child want to learn, but its hard you see
he says teacher is alway picking on me.
Child mother fixed him a sandwich for lunch,
meanwhile child steals Daddy cigareet butts.

Sunday is God day,
Child go to church instead of play.
He pray to God and ask him please,
have someone take a interest in me.

Child have no fear,
even though the Ghetto is here.
Take up your will and fight back your Tears.

Take what you have, it may not be much.
Organize in groups or even a bunch.
It will take time and energy you see,
One day I hope you'll be free.

Both of these, I feel, are excellent compositions. The first one would probably do pretty well by the conventional standards of the freshman classroom. The poem is a deliberate use of dialect (by an author who would, in any event, have used some dialect) and is a possible instance of where the freedom to use dialect in a writing assignment has allowed the author to write comfortably, naturally and dramatically about the subject. Both papers illustrate well the broad principles I hoped to teach—concretion, coherence, etc.

I do not wish to claim large amounts of praise or blame for the papers I've quoted, or for whatever did or didn't happen in my course called "language skills." Obviously a ten-week session with adult job trainees presents perplexing choices of priority and emphasis for a teacher who is used to fifteen weeks with kids who have never stepped off the conveyor belt of our education system. All I wish to claim here is that my experience suggests that perhaps the most important thing about nonstandard adult writers may not be that they're nonstandard, but that they want to write and have something to say. If that is the case, a composition course should free them to write.

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